DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 064 713 CS 200 004

AUTHOR Grimwood, Doris R.
TITLE A Study of the Correlation between Kindergarten Children's Paintings and Their Oral Commentaries about Them.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 19p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Art; *Child Development; Child Language; Creative Expression; Environmental Influences; Family Environment; *Kindergarten Children; Language Development; Language Usage; *Maturation; *Oral Communication; *Painting; Speech

ABSTRACT

This paper considers 12 paintings which are a cross-section of the art work done by a kindergarten class of 5-year-olds in an attempt to support the following assertions: that there is a qualitative correspondence between the level of maturity evidenced in the paintings and in their speaking about them; that the degree of development in both speech and painting is affected by the child's home environment; and that increasing sophistication in most children's paintings is paralleled by increasing sophistication in their use of language. Only partial evidence was found to support these assertions. Correspondence between levels of maturity in painting and in oral language was recognizable in 6 of the 12 paintings. Significant indications that the child's home environment affected development in painting and speech were apparent in four examples. Increasing sophistication in painting corresponded to increasing sophistication in language usage in five instances out of a possible nine. Photographs of the paintings considered are included in the paper. (CL)

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A Study of the Correlation Between Kindergarten Children's Paintings and Their Oral Commentaries about Them

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Doris R. Grimwood
Art Consultant
Windsor Separate Schools
Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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During twelve years as an art teacher in a Windsor elementary school, I observed that many children as they experienced satisfaction and a feeling of successful accomplishment in the art program appeared to gain added confidence in solving problems in other subjects. Comprehensive exploration into a possible relationship between competence in painting and competence in other work was precluded by the demands of maintaining viable and meaningful art activities for some four hundred children in addition to fulfilling the requirements of an academic program for a class of thirty-five to forty pupils. Occasionally it was possible to arrange individual noon hour painting sessions for children with severe emotional problems. These seemed to ease their tensions and help them work more effectively in the classroom. But the relationship between achievement in art and achievement in other aspects of the school program, particularly in what is now termed language arts, continued to be tantalizingly speculative. Hence an investigation regarding a possible correlation between pictures by children and their use of spoken English is of particular interest to me.

A study of the paintings of kindergarten children and of the verbal explanations proferred by them about their work indicated support of the following assertions:

First, there is a qualitative correspondence between the level of maturity exhibited in kindergarten children's paintings and their level of maturity in speaking about them.

Second, the degree of development in both speech and painting is affected by the home environment of each child.

Third, increasing sophistication in most children's paintings is paralleled by increasing sophistication in their use of language.

Chosen from several hundred pictures, the paintings considered in this paper are a cross-section of the Art work done by a kindergarten class of five year olds over a four week period early in 1972. Picture making throughout the school year is preceded by informal talks about the children's interests and experiences, and by participation in subject related

storytelling, songs and games. A child usually completes a painting within 15 minutes, after which the teacher requests that he tell her about his picture, (eliciting a response as noted in (a) after each illustration). A question is then asked about what is happening in the picture, (drawing forth an explanation as noted in (b) after each illustration). This second response is printed by the teacher on a slip of paper which is stapled to the upper right hand corner of the painting. The reason for this procedure is to help the child relate what he says to the printed words as one of many ways of helping him learn to read. (In language games and during "show and tell time", the teacher had been encouraging her class to use the pronoun "I", which probably accounts, at least in part, for the high incidence of its usage in (b).

In my assessment of the maturity level indicated in each child's painting, I followed criteria established by Viktor Lowenfeld[1] and terminology used by Kenneth Jameson[2]. It was not surprising to find no evidence of the earliest level designated as completely "scribble" painting since, although a child "may be capable only of random manipulation when he enters kindergarten"[3], he has usually advanced before January,[4] to the first of the four levels found in this class.

The "scribble, dot and patch" paintings designated in this paper as Level I, (Figures 1, 2 and 3), illustrate the most immature level of painting in this class. Except for a suggestion of a cross in Figure 2, none of the shapes or lines suggest any specific objects. Although each picture contains at least one strong, well-defined shape, there is

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[1]Lowenfeld, Viktor, and Brittain, W. Lambert. Creative and Mental Growth. Fourth edition. London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1964, pp. 93-100, 115-118.

[2]Jameson, Kenneth. Pre-School and Infant Art. London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1968. pp. 14-35.

[3]Gaitskell, Charles D. Children and Their Art. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958. p. 130.

[4]This advancement would not be expected, of course, of a child with severe problems of muscular coordination or of a child who had had little opportunity to paint.

Figure 1. Painting by Janis.
(a) Me and my brother
(b) My brother is skating on the ice rink. I'm falling.

Figure 2. Painting by Chris.
(a) A cross and a snake.
(b) A cross and a snake on a road.

Figure 3. Painting by Raymond.

(a) A bad man in the car.

(b) A bad man is in the car and my friends are running away.

considerable evidence of random painting. Experienced kindergarten teachers often infer from pictures like these that the children who paint them may be slower than their peers in developing competency in reading and other language skills.

None of the first comments about the paintings were in the form of complete sentences. Despite the teacher's interest and encouragement, Chris in his second response added only a few words, still without making a complete statement; Raymond explained his more complex painting with two sentences joined by the conjunction "and"; Janis described the action in her picture in two complete sentences.

Inquiry revealed that Chris is extremely shy and has little to say to other children or the teacher. His mother is overprotective and worries about trivial incidents; his sister, older than he by several years, has been having psychiatric treatment for some time. Both Raymond and Janis came into the class from other schools in December; neither had had much painting experience. Raymond, in the teacher's words, "doesn't talk much", but is becoming more responsive. Janis "talks a lot, speaks clearly and articulates well".

It would seem that only in regard to Chris' work does there exist a valid correspondence between the level of maturity in painting and the level of maturity in the use of language. With more painting experience, Raymond's and Janis' pictures will probably show a closer relationship to their ability in using spoken English.

The "big head, hairpin figure" paintings designated as Level II (Figures 4, 5 and 6), are a little below the expectancy level of competence in kindergarten painting at midyear when an awareness of either a body or body details is often evident. Only in Figure 4 is there some indication of this. Except for the sun symbol in Figure 5, and the rudimentary church in Figure 6, the content of these pictures would likely be unrecognizable to anyone except the individual painters.

Figure 4. Painting by Wayne.

(a) This is me and this is my mom.

(b) My mom and me are opening presents. My brother is hiding.

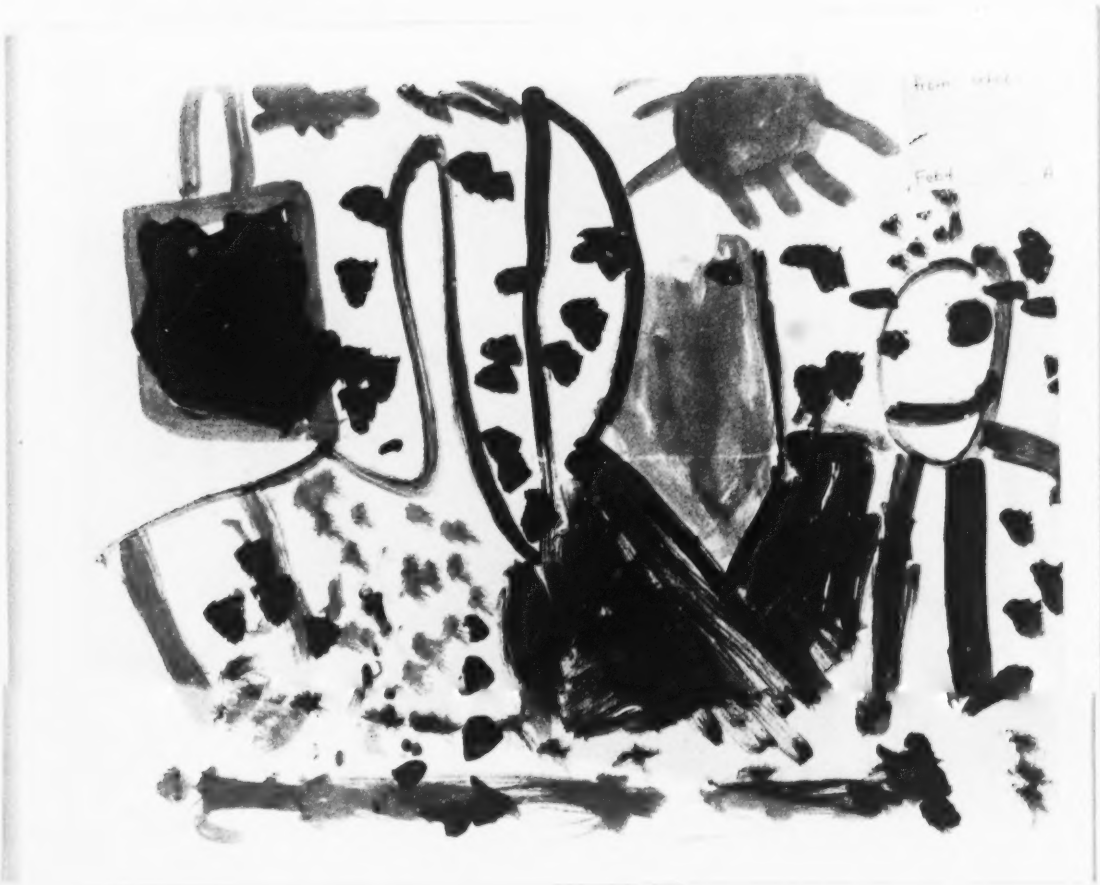

Figure 5. Painting by Andy.
(a) This is me walking.
(b) I'm walking home from school.

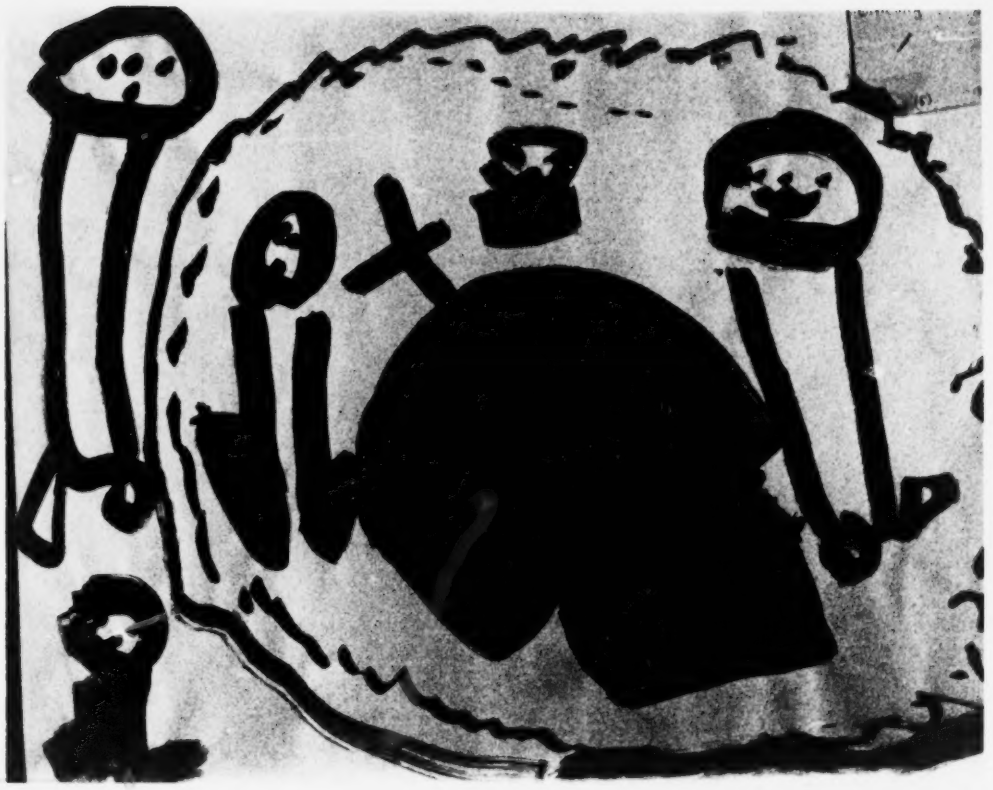

Figure 6. Painting by Mike.
(a) Me going to church.
(b) I'm going to church with my family.

In each example shown, the painter did more than merely identify objects in his first comments. Both Wayne and Andy used the typical "This is me" structure to form sentences; Wayne repeated the first two words to identify his mother and used "and" as a connecting word; Andy completed his statement with the participle "walking"; Mike deleted "This is" but gave more information. In their second responses, both Andy and Mike used the contraction "I'm" correctly and explained the activity in each of their paintings a little more; Wayne gave a more detailed explanation of his work in two complete sentences but used "me" as part of the subject of his first statement.

Wayne is described by his teacher as a "good conversationalist" whose grammatical structure is occasionally faulty. In both Andy's and Mike's families a foreign language is spoken at home. The three boys' competence in painting and competence in speaking seem to be at much the same level.

The paintings at Level III in which the "human figure" is present, (Figures 7, 8 and 9), show varying bodily features, consistent with expectations of average kindergarten pictures. Other commonly found symbols are also included: a house, cloud, and spots (representing snow) in Figure 7; clouds in Figure 8; the sun in Figure 9. Each painting also gives stronger indication of human movement.

In the first comments about the pictures "This is me and _____" occurs for Figures 8 and 9 with the latter statement actually two sentences spoken as one. Deletion of "This is" occures for Figure 7. More information is given about each depicted activity in the second statements. All three children used "I'm" correctly. Darrin proffered two sentences describing not only his own activity but also that of the sun.

The teacher has had no indication of any particular stresses in any of these boys' homes. In each of them, English is the spoken language.

Figure 7. Painting by Craig.
(a) Me and my house.
(b) I'm going home for lunch.

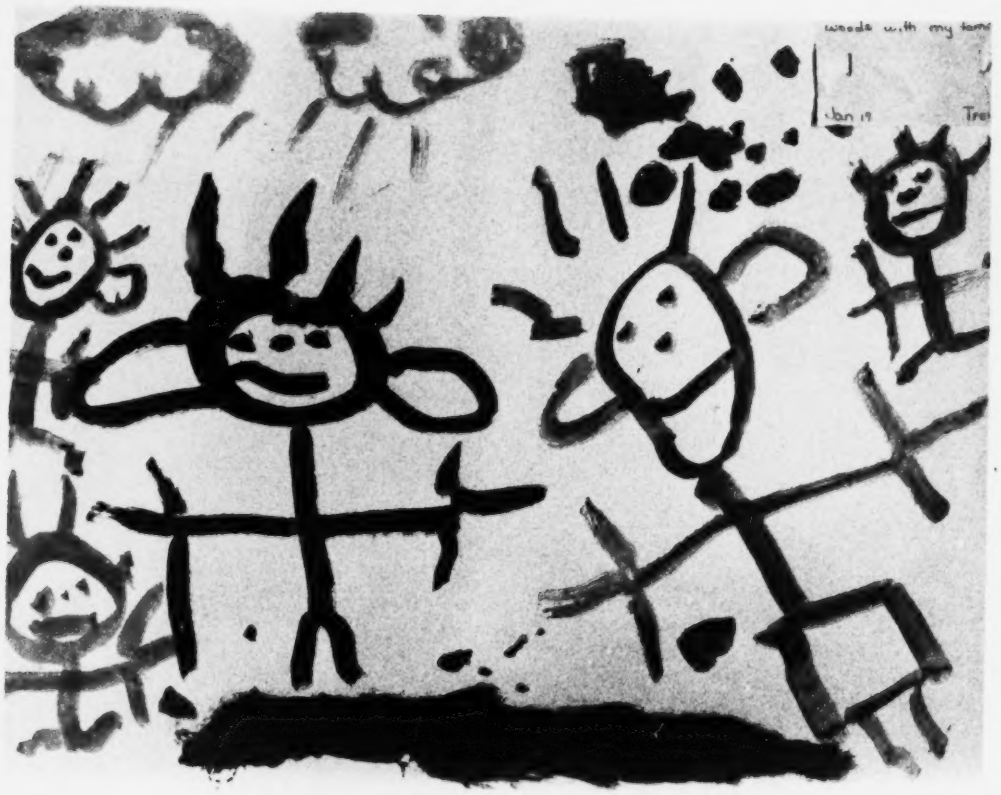

Figure 8. Painting by Troy.
(a) This is me and my family.
(b) I'm walking in the woods with my family.

Figure 9. Painting by Darrin.
(a) This is me and this is the sun flashing.
(b) I'm going to church. The sun is flashing.

The amount of content in the children's commentaries is not greater than those in Level II. Except for consistent use of "I" as subject at this level there is no appreciable difference in syntax. Greater sophistication in language usage is not evident to any important degree.

The Level IV "clothed figure" in the last three illustrations depicts above average painting maturity. The lack of hands and feet in Figure 10 is compensated for by the solidity of the two people and the reinforcement of the overall happy feeling by the expression on the "face" of the sun. Absence of detail other than the grass and the haystack seems to emphasize the awareness of space at the farm. Figures 11 and 12 contain well defined houses, a hat on the boy in one painting and on Santa Claus in the other, as well as clothing details. The Christmas decorations in Figure 12 and the depiction of Rudolph's mumps (I would have guessed that he had measles!) are very effective.

Increased sophistication in speech in the first explanation is indicated only by Willie in Figure 12. The expanded comments range from a single complete sentence for Figure 10 to two long sentences for Figure 11 and three sentences for Figure 12. In spite of the misuse of "and" in connection with the last two pictures, each description contains a greater amount of pertinent detail. Sandra's use of "but" in her sentence is evidence of greater sophistication as is Willie's explanation of Rudolph's appearance and his comment about what he imagines Santa to be saying.

Ann is the youngest of five children who has outgrown the baby talk she used during her first two months at school. She is described by her teacher as "shy and quiet, but extremely smart." Sandra and Willie are members of stable families; both are making good progress academically.

The maturity evident in Ann's painting is not matched by her statement about it, but the level of sophistication in Sandra's and Willie's comments corresponds with the level of sophistication shown in their pictures.

Figure 10. Painting by Ann.
(a) Me at the farm.
(b) I'm going to see the farmer.

Figure 11. Painting by Sandra.

(a) Me and an elf in my house and a little boy.

(b) I'm sleeping in my house and the little boy comes in looking for me. There is an elf in my house but the boy didn't see him.

Figure 12. Painting by Willie.

(a) This is Santa Claus and this is Rudolph. I'm asleep in my house.

(b) I'm asleep waiting for Santa Claus and my house is all decorated. Rudolph has the mumps! Santa says whoa!

In spite of the careful (and hopeful) scrutiny given a cross section of kindergarten paintings and the comments each painter made about his own work, I feel that only partial evidence has been found to support my thesis:

A qualitative correspondence between the level of painting maturity and the level of maturity in oral language was recognizable in six of the twelve pictures.

Significant indications that the child's home environment affected the degree of development in speech and in painting were apparent in four examples.

Increasing sophistication in painting corresponded to increasing sophistication in language usage in five instances out of a possible nine.

A further study of a wider cross section of paintings, with those of children with little previous painting experience being eliminated from the survey, would yield presumably more substantial evidence for my thesis. Follow-up studies of the painting and language usage of the same children in Grades I and II would also be pertinent in pursuing research into the correlation between sophistication levels in painting and in language.